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ABSTRACT

Teaching practice in schools is an essential component of the professional practice courses for primary student teachers at the University of Waikato (New Zealand). During the first three years of their training, students have a combination of short term placement in normal schools, and longer blocks of teaching practice in other schools. During this time they are expected to gain experience in urban and rural schools with junior (year 1-3), middle (year 4-6), and senior (year 7-8) levels, across all curriculum subject areas. The practicum comprises tasks from both professional practice and curriculum courses. In their fourth year, students are expected to undertake action research projects for short periods in schools. The professional practice courses aim to empower student teachers through the development of a reflective approach to the process of teaching, the development of clear links between theory and practice and the encouragement of a critical analysis of educational issues. This paper outlines the principles underpinning the teaching practicum, describes the structure and organization of the school-based component, and comments on some emerging practical, theoretical, and political issues. (Author/IAH)

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# PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE COURSES AT WAIKATO UNIVERSITY : THE SCHOOL-BASED COMPONENT

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# PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO : THE SCHOOL-BASED COMPONENT.


## Abstract

Teaching practice in schools is an essential component of the Professional Practice courses for Primary student teachers at Waikato. During the first three years of their training, students have a combination of short term placement in Normal schools, and longer blocks of teaching practice in other schools. During this time they are expected to gain experience in urban and rural schools with junior (Year 1-3) middle (Year 4-6) and senior (Year 7-8) class levels, across all curriculum subject areas. The practicum comprises tasks from both Professional Practice and Curriculum courses. In their fourth year students are expected to undertake action research projects for short periods in schools.

The Professional Practice courses aim to empower student teachers through the development of a reflective approach to the process of teaching, the development of clear links between theory and practice and the encouragement of a critical analysis of educational issues.

This paper outlines the principles underpinning the teaching practicum, describes the structure and organisation of the school-based component, and comments on some emerging issues.


Until recently, the teaching practice component of the Waikato teacher education programme, although a compulsory aspect, was not given any formal credit towards the student's education degree. Students simply had to reach a certain standard of competency to meet the requirements for their Diploma of Teaching (a three year programme, at the end of which students can graduate with two thirds of an education degree). In 1991 the former Hamilton Teachers College amalgamated with the University of Waikato, and, with the former university Education Department, became the School of Education. Shortly after this the Bachelor of Education degree structure was altered so that there are now four compulsory professional practice papers for primary teacher trainees, of which school-based practice is an integral part.

One of the important features of the new programme has been that of clear links between the theoretical and practical components. The courses have been informed by research (e.g. Ramsay and Battersby, 1988) and several important principles underpin the course content.

## PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING TEACHING PRACTICE.

### A Strong Theoretical Base

A series of key strands run through each of the professional practice courses to provide a clear horizontal articulation of ideas and practice. These strands evolve from research and writing in the field of teacher education.

### The Value Of Reflection

Writers such as Schon (1983) have focused on the value of the reflective process for growth in understanding of teaching and its effects on learners, and students are expected to engage in this process during their university courses and in schools. Practices which allow this to happen include the setting of personal goals by

students, and a specific mid-section and end-of-section written reflection on personal progress.

**A Critical View of Education**

This principle is closely allied to the previous one and is based on the view that education and schooling are located within broader social, political and economic contexts. Students are encouraged to look beyond the technical aspects of classroom teaching and to discuss critically a variety of educational issues.

**Student Choice**

Students are expected to gain experience in each of the three broad areas of primary schooling : Juniors (Years 1-3) middle (Years 4-6) and senior (Years 7-8). However they may choose the order in which they do so, and except for some special instances, they choose their school and associate teacher.They are also encouraged to gain experience in different kinds of schools where possible (e.g. urban, rural, intermediate, bilingual and kura kaupapa Maori). The latter two are available for students who are bilingual in English and Maori.

**Integration Of Course Work With Practice**

Guidelines and tasks for teaching practice are provided by the professional studies, and the curriculum studies course lecturers. Students are encouraged to draw upon understandings built up prior to teaching practice to inform their school-based experience, and also to use the latter to contribute to course work following teaching practice.

**Competence In Subject Areas**

New Zealand primary teachers are required to teach eight subject areas to children between Years 1-8 (language, mathematics, social studies, science, physical education, health, art, music) In addition, all student teachers must have a basic understanding of Maori language and culture[1] , and know how to use computers as a learning aid. A tecnology curriculum document has also been drafted which will be implemented across other curriculum areas within the next few years. In their first year students gain knowledge of all curriculum areas, including Maori, and can then specialise in two or more of these in the remainder of their programme. Reading and mathematics courses are compulsory for the first two years.

Waikato also offers a parallel teacher education programme conducted in the Maori language for those who wish to work in the growing number of bilingual and total immersion Maori language classes and schools.

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[1] In addition to the compulsory curriculum subjects there is a official, though not yet compulsory, Maori language syllabus.

**A Repertoire Of Teaching Methods**

Students are encouraged to build a repertoire of methods and strategies that suit their own philosophy and teaching style, and which provide a basis for sound practice, rather than relying on a 'recipe' approach to teaching.

**Knowledge of the teaching-learning process**

Students are expected to develop an indepth knowledge of the teaching-learning process and must know how to plan programmes based on the assessment of children's individual learning needs. This development occurs sequentially through the school-based component.

**A Collegial Approach**

Successful teaching practice depends on the development of sound relationships between several people involved in the process: the teaching practice coordinator, the student teacher, the associate teacher, the school liaison lecturer, the visiting lecturer (and, of course, the children)!

## STRUCTURE OF THE SCHOOL-BASED COMPONENT

### i) Placement

During the first three years of their programme students have a placement-type teaching practice where they have access to local Normal schools to implement specific lessons or units of work with children. First year students have a special day put aside each week for this while second and third year students have a wider range of access times but on a less regular basis. The placement programme allows students to apply concepts learned in curriculum and professional studies courses to real classroom situations. Their lessons may involve one child, a group of children or a full class, and students may be required to teach individually or as part of a team. Course lecturers and classroom teachers work with the student teachers in a variety of ways to provide feedback on their progress.

### ii) Block Teaching Practice

A block of time is set aside each year in which students are placed in schools of their choice to allow for a sustained programme of teaching practice.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Year 1 | 4 weeks | November |
| Year 2 | 6 weeks | August-October |
| Year 3 | 7 weeks | May-July |

Because students can graduate from their teacher education programme with a Diploma of Teaching after three years, their competency to manage classroom teaching has to be developed during block teaching sections within that time. Thus the newly developed fourth year professional practice course will not require a block

section, but will involve the assignment of students to a particular school to collaborate with a teacher in the development of an action research project.

The School of Education also runs a two year 'shortened course' programme for students whose prior academic experience and qualifications can be given recognition. These students are still required to complete three block sections within that time.

**iii) Professional Support Modules (Voluntary)**

The three year Diploma of Teaching programme has a requirement that students complete 12 modules (24 hour equivalent) of Professional Support. A wide variety of modules are offered and cover content that is important for teachers but does not warrant a full degree credit course. One of the modules is a voluntary two-week period of teaching practice early in the school year. Many students opt to do this to gain further experience in working with children. There are no specific tasks set for this module, but students are expected to take a full part in the class programme.

**ORGANISATION OF THE 'BLOCK' SCHOOL-BASED COMPONENT.**

**i) Assignment of Students to Schools**

All Division A teaching practice is organised by the Teaching Practice Coordinator, who is a senior academic staff member with wide knowledge of schools and teachers in the School of Education catchment area. Each year all eligible schools receive a form on which the principal lists all teachers who are willing to be associate teachers and whose competency for this role is endorsed by the principal. Prior to each block section a full list of available schools, associate teachers and their class levels is made available o the students who then submit a first, second and third choice to the teaching practice office. The coordinator then places all students with one of their choice of schools wherever possible. This draft list is then circulated to the 5-member Teaching Practice Liaison team who check to see if there are any changes needed (e.g for reasons such as an inappropriate student-associate match). The list is then publicly displayed on the student notice board, and schools and teachers are formally notified of the placements. Once this has happened students are free to personally contact their associate teachers to gather information about the class, resources, planning needs and so on.

**ii) The Teaching Practice Liaison Team**

A group of five academic staff comprise the liaison team. Their duties include briefing students and associate teachers about the teaching practice requirements, and providing support, mediation and/or information where needed. They do not have responsibility for evaluative visits and are therefore seen as 'neutral' by students and

associates. Each liaison team member has responsibility for a particular group of schools so that they can build a sound ongoing relationship with the principal and staff. Prior to teaching practice each liaison lecturer briefs their group of students, and then follows this with a 'formal' liaison visit to the schools early in the teaching practice to brief teachers and to pick up on any initial concerns. After this time they are available 'on call' to teachers and students.

**iii) Documents**

Students and associate teachers both receive identical material - a handbook which details the section requirements, a planning sheet on which the requirements can be plotted, and a checklist to ensure that tasks are regularly monitored. The other key document is the student profile and report form. The first part of this is completed by the student and includes information about their campus programme, prior experience, and specific professional goals for the current teaching practice. There is also provision for reflective statements at the middle and end of teaching practice. The latter part of the document contains a report form which is completed by the associate at the end of the practice period and returned to the School of Education for inclusion on the students official file. The document also includes the specific criteria which are used by the associate and visiting lecturer to assess the student. These criteria build upon the requirements of the previous year and increase in breadth and complexity as the students gain experience.

An associate teacher handbook containing guidelines for the various aspects of the practicum is also provided to schools .

**iv) Evaluation of Progress**

Associate teachers have a major responsibility for evaluation of student progress and are expected to provide written and oral feedback on a regular basis, and to write a detailed report at the end of the teaching practice.

Students receive one official evaluative visit from academic staff in their first block teaching practice and two in each of the following two years. Where there is concern about their progress extra visits are arranged. Each member of the academic staff has responsibility for making evaluative visits for a small group of students. They observe students teaching for a specific period of time, discuss progress with the student and associate, and leave fieldnotes. At the end of the teaching practice the visiting lecturers write a report which summarises student progress under several headings (e.g. relationships with children, classroom management and teaching techniques, curriculum knowledge) and which is included with that of the associate teacher. Upon the completion of the third teaching practice the visiting lecturers gather all information from the students' file and write the official final report which students

can then use when applying for a teaching position.

In some instances a student may fail to meet the teaching practice requirements to a satisfactory standard. This may be due to a range of reasons from illness to lack of expertise in an aspect of teaching. In such cases students may be required to repeat part or all of their section, either later in the same year or early in the following one. In some cases where students are unable to meet requirements to a satisfactory level their programme may be terminated.

## CONTENT OF THE 'BLOCK' SCHOOL-BASED COMPONENT

The teaching practice handbook outlines a range of tasks, a few of which are compulsory (although the trend has been to increase the range of optional tasks. For first year students the emphasis is on the implementation of individual lessons or a series of lessons in maths and language, and on planning, teaching and assessing groups of learners in as many curriculum areas as possible. Where student confidence, associate judgment and class dynamics allow, students may take periods of full control of a class. The other focus during the first year is on understanding the operation of the classroom and the complexities of the teacher's role. During the second year a similar pattern occurs except that there is a greater emphasis on planning and implementing subject 'units', and students are expected to work more frequently with several groups at a time, culminating in at least one week of full control. During the third year teaching practice students are expected to operate much more closely as they would as Year One teachers, to plan teach and assess units of work across all curriculum areas, taking into account the learning needs of individual children, and to take full control of the class programme for a minimum of two weeks. Curriculum subject tasks are set by the Curriculum and Subject Studies Department at the School of Education and there is usually a task set by the Professional Studies Department which may require students to look at content outside specific areas.( The Division A3 students, for example, are currently investigating school policy and practice for the involvement of parents in the school programme).

All student planning and record keeping is maintained in a teaching practice folder which is available for perusal by the associate teacher and visiting lecturer.

## TEACHING PRACTICE ISSUES

School-based teaching practice is by its very structure replete with potential and actual problems. Individual students, associate teachers and visiting lecturers have widely varying philosophies and beliefs about the nature of learning and teaching, and may also have differing expectations of each other in the classroom situation. Issues

arising from school-based practice can be categorised into at least three areas; *practical* issues (related to the actual experience in schools) *theoretical* issues (related to the structure and organisation of school-based practice) and *political* issues (related to the changing expectations of pre-service teacher education). A brief comment on each of these follows.

**Practical issues**

A key area of concern for students is their actual placement in schools, particularly for the block teaching practice. Concerns usually centre around matters such as their relationship with the associate teacher, whether the associate's beliefs about management strategies and teaching will be compatible with theirs and whether there will be enough flexibility for their own requirements and expectations to be met. The roles of the teaching practice coordinator and the liaison lecturer have proved to be an important means of reducing the likelihood of serious mismatch between student and associate, but problems can still sometimes occur. In such instances the student is expected to attempt to resolve the issue in a professional manner, and the liaison lecturer can play a mediating role, but where the problem cannot be resolved the student is usually withdrawn and reassigned.

Problems can also arise in connection with the evaluative visits. Recent research by Calder, Faire and Schon,(1993) found that issues such as student knowledge of the lecturer, the perceived credibility of lecturers, and style of feedback during visits were important considerations. Their study indicated that concerns about, for example, whether staff with secondary experience should visit students in primary classrooms, or whether lecturers with expertise in one curriculum area should assess students in other subject areas, or even whether staff who had been out of the classroom situation for several years should assess students, were not upheld by the majority of lecturers responsible for evaluative visits.

> These lecturers would argue that quality teaching experience at any level gives one the ability to recognise whether [global] skills are present or not. Furthermore an understanding of how children develop through various stages is assumed to be common knowledge among lecturers in a school of education. Assessment of curriculum knowledge might best be done in the context of curriculum courses taken by each student.
>
> (Calder, Faire and Schon 1993 : 21)

Where such concerns may be genuine, Calder and his colleagues suggest that staff development is one appropriate method for resolving them. A further issue identified in their research, and one that is emerging in a current study by Lang (1994) is that of the need for further development by students of the planning process. This issue has also been identified in both anecdotal and written comments by associate teachers.

Research by McGee, Oliver and Cartensen (1994) has found evidence of high personal expectations and greater levels of stress for third year student teachers. They recommended that students be helped to develop strategies for keeping teaching tasks at a manageable level, and to develop realistic expectations about what they can achieve with children. Student anxiety in their third year is often related to concerns about their likelihood of winning a teaching position, and they also tend to be more sensitive to the pressures experienced by their associates in the current climate of educational change.

**Theoretical issues**

A comprehensive study of the school-based training of Division A (Primary) student teachers was undertaken by Ramsay and Battersby (1988).They concluded that pre-service teacher education was predicated on 'technocratic rationality" which they defined as "an overemphasis on the mastery of specific techniques of practice, on skilling and on management and control techniques [which were ] often considered in a non-critical and non-reflective way" (p.17) Their recommendation was that a more effective teacher education would be

- theoretically informed
- intellectually rigorous
- individualised, negotiated and contested
- underpinned by an ideology of partnership and collaboration, and,
- built on a background of tertiary liberal education (p.19).

The current professional practice courses at Waikato have been informed by this and other research and have attempted to build in such recommendations to both the on-campus and school-based component. Anecdotal evidence from associate teachers suggest that our students are showing more consistent development across the first three years but as the new programme is only in its third year, it is probably too soon to make firm conclusions. Further research is needed here.

Another problem identified by Ramsay and Battersby (1988) is that of the 'theory-practice gap'. By this they refer to the mismatch that can occur between the theory and knowledge put forward in education courses and and the kinds of teaching experience gained in classrooms (p11). This is probably the 'thorniest' issue in school-based practice, with the attendant danger that students will place greater value on the 'practical' pedagogy and ignore the theoretical side. Lecturers have attempted to reduce the impact of this problem through the involvement of some teachers (particularly in the Normal schools) in collaborative assignments with students and lecturers, through the liaison team role, and through an emphasis on the development of critical reflection skills by student teachers.

**Political Issues**

Tertiary institutions responsible for the education of teachers, are faced with the need to examine their programmes to ensure that graduates are appropriately prepared to move into the 'new' educational environment. On the other hand, there is some tension between the views of professional teacher educators and those of politicians, Treasury officials, and groups such as the Business Round Table, about what constitutes the most effective content and delivery of pre-service teacher education.

A key issue facing teacher education institutions in the present economic climate is that of funding. Teacher education is one of the most expensive forms of tertiary education, largely because of the cost of the school-based practice. At Waikato the teaching practice sector has recently , along with other departments, had to look at cost cutting measures. Tensions can arise when there is pressure to work within a restricted budget while maintaining the integrity of a teacher education programme.

A second, related cause for concern is the question of who should provide teacher education. In New Zealand the majority of pre-service education is done by the School of Education and five Colleges of Education. A small number of private providers exist but they are largely concerned with specialised areas of teacher education (e.g. teachers for kura kaupapa Maori, and Catholic schools). The New Zealand Qualifications Authority is currently developing a national framework for linking vocational and academic qualifications, and pressure is being exerted on teacher education to become a part of such a framework. The debate is centred on whether teacher education can be effectively conducted in such a system with its emphasis on 'unit standards' and interchangeable modules of learning.

New Zealand teacher educators are also keenly watching current political developments in the United Kingdom where moves are afoot to transfer the responsibility for pre-service education from higher education to the schools. There would be strong resistance to consideration of any similar moves in New Zealand.

## CONCLUSION

Pre-service teacher education in New Zealand has until recently been largely free from rigorous scrutiny, but as broader political and economic pressures are brought to bear this is beginning to change. It is most important that debate about its content and implementation be informed by sound research and practice. The professional practice courses at Waikato University are attempting to provide a sound theoretical basis for the development of 'good practice' in the school and anecdotal evidence from both students and associate teachers suggests that they are seeing

greater consistency and coherence in the programme. The Professional Studies Department is committed to developing further research to ensure that the best practice continues. Our teachers and children deserve nothing less.

## Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| **associate teacher** | a teacher in whose classroom a student teacher is placed. |
| **kura kaupapa Maori** | a Maori language immersion school whose programme operates from a basis of Maori culture and purposes. |
| **Normal school** | a school whose staff receive a special allowance in return for providing regular access for student teachers to work with children. |
| **section** | an alternative term for school-based teaching practice. |
| **unit** | a coherent series of lessons based around a central theme or subject. |

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